



Springing

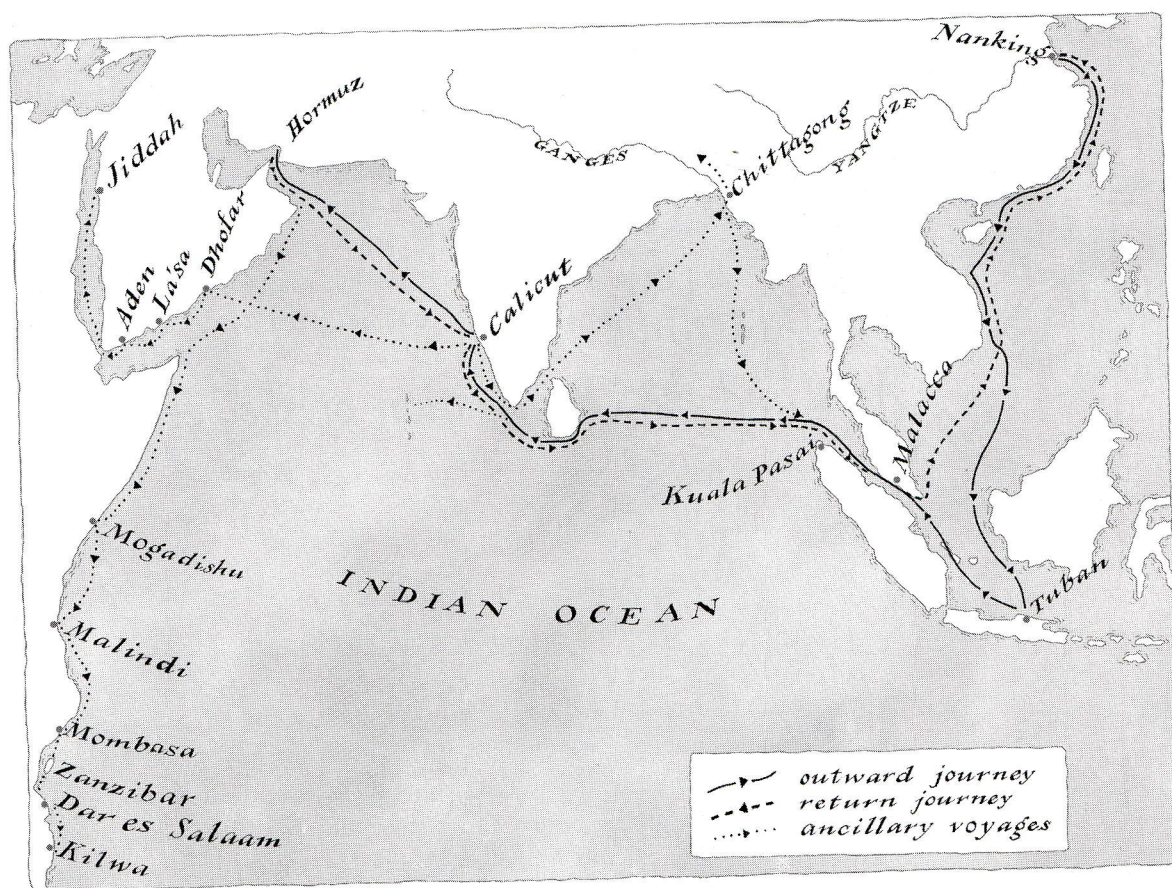
The Maritime Turn of the Late Middle Ages and the Penetration of the Atlantic

Shy traffickers, the dark Iberians come.

Matthew Arnold, 'The Scholar Gypsy'

PERHAPS because he was a usurper with a lot to prove, China's Yongle emperor was willing to pay almost any price for glory. From the time he seized the throne in 1402 until his death twenty-two years later, he waged almost incessant war on China's borders, especially on the Mongol and Annamese fronts. He scattered at least seventy-two missions to every accessible land beyond China's borders. He sent silver to the shogun in Japan (who already had plenty of silver), and statues of Buddha and gifts of gems and silks to Tibet and Nepal. He exchanged ill-tempered embassies with Muslim potentates in central Asia, and invested kings in Korea, Melaka, Borneo, Sulu, Sumatra, and Ceylon. These far-flung contacts probably cost more in gifts than they raised in what the Chinese called 'tribute': live okapi from Bengal, white elephants from Cambodia, horses and concubines from Korea, turtles and white monkeys from Siam, paintings from Afghanistan, sulfur and spears and samurai armor from Japan. But they were magnificent occasions of display, which gave Yongle prestige in his own court and perhaps some sense of security.¹

The grandest and most expensive of the missions went by sea. Between 1405 and 1433 seven formidable flag-waving expeditions ranged the Indian Ocean under Admiral Zheng He. The scale of his efforts was massive. The first expedition was said to comprise sixty-two junks of the largest dimensions ever built, 225 support vessels, and 27,780 men. The vessels—to judge from a recently discovered rudder post—justified the awed terms of contemporary



assessments, displacing, perhaps, over 3,000 tons: this was ten times the size of the largest ships afloat in Europe at the time. The voyages lasted, on average, two years each. They visited at least thirty-two countries around the rim of the ocean. The first three voyages, between 1405 and 1411, only went as far as the Malabar coast, the principal source of the world's pepper supply, with excursions along the coasts of Siam, Malaya, Java, Sumatra, and Ceylon. On the fourth voyage, from 1413 to 1415, ships visited the Maldives, Ormuz, and Jiddah, and collected envoys from nineteen countries.

Even more than the arrival of the ambassadors, it was the inclusion of a giraffe among the tribute Zheng He had gathered that caused a sensation when the fleet returned to China. No giraffe had ever been seen in China before. Zheng He acquired his in Bengal, where it had arrived as a curiosity for a princely collection as a result of trading links across the Indian Ocean with East Africa. Chinese instantly identified the creature as of divine provenance. According to an eyewitness it had 'the body of a deer and the tail of an ox and a fleshy boneless horn, with luminous spots like a red or purple mist. It walks in

Routes of Zheng He



Painting by Xendu of a giraffe with attendant, fifteenth century

stately fashion and in its every motion it observes a rhythm.' Carried away by confusion with the mythical qilin, or unicorn, the same observer declared, 'Its harmonious voice sounds like a bell or musical tube.'

The giraffe brought an assurance of divine benevolence. Xendu, the artist who made a surviving drawing from life, wrote accompanying verses describing the giraffe's reception at court:

The ministers and the people all gathered to gaze at it and their joy knows no end. I, your servant, have heard that when a sage possesses the virtue of the utmost benevolence, so that he illuminates the darkest places, then a ch'i-lin appears. This shows that your Majesty's virtue equals that of heaven. Its merciful blessings have spread far and wide, so that its harmonious vapours have emanated a ch'i-lin, as an endless blessing to the state for myriad years.²

Accompanying the envoys home on a fifth voyage, which lasted from 1416 to 1419, Zheng He followed up the éclat of the giraffe's appearance. He collected a prodigious array of exotic beasts for the imperial menagerie: lions, leopards, camels, ostriches, zebras, rhinoceroses, antelopes, and giraffes, as well as a mysterious beast, the Touou-yu. Drawings made this last creature resemble a white tiger with black spots, while written accounts describe a 'righteous beast' who would not tread on growing grass, was strictly vegetarian, and appeared 'only under a prince of perfect benevolence and

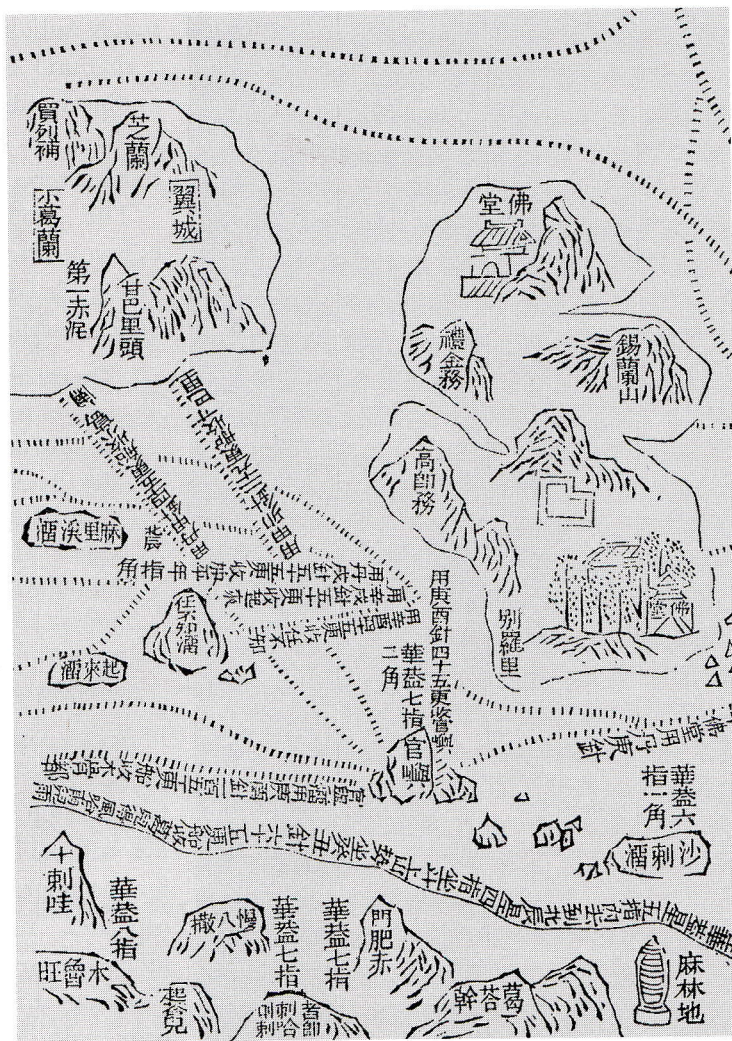
sincerity.' There were also many 'strange birds.' An inscription recorded, 'All of them craned their necks and looked on with pleasure, stamping their feet, scared and startled.' That was a description not of the birds but of the enraptured courtiers. Truly it seemed to Xendu, 'all the creatures that spell good fortune arrive.'³

In 1421 Zheng He's sixth voyage departed with the reconnaissance of the east coast of Africa as its main objective, visiting, among other destinations, Mogadishu, Mombasa, Malindi, Zanzibar, Dar es Salaam, and Kilwa. After an interval, probably caused by changes in the balance of court factions after the

death of the Yongle emperor in 1424, the seventh voyage, from 1431 to 1433, was probably the furthest-penetrating. It sailed 12,618 miles in all, according to the best available estimate, and renewed contacts with the Arabian and African states Zheng He had already visited.⁴

Strictly speaking these were not route-finding voyages. As we have seen, the trade routes of the Indian Ocean, across maritime Asia and into East Africa, had been familiar to Chinese merchants for centuries. The early thirteenth-century Zhufanji provided a practical handbook for commercial travelers in southeast Asia and India. There were certainly opportunities to increase commercial openings by backing initiatives with force. The trades of the region were highly lucrative, including spices, fragrant hardwoods, valuable medicinal drugs, and exotic animal products. The Chinese called Zheng He's ships 'treasure ships.' The motives,

however, transcended commerce. Zheng He was engaged on what would now be called flag-waving missions, impressing the ports he visited with Chinese power, and stimulating the awe of the emperor's home constituency with exotica which the Chinese classified as the tribute of remote peoples.⁵ The official pretext for his commission—which few believed, then or now—was to search for a fugitive ex-emperor, who was supposed to be in hiding abroad. Strategic considerations were clearly involved. Zheng He intervened actively in the politics of some ports in southeast Asia that were important for China's trade and security. A potentially hostile empire had recently arisen in central Asia under the Turkic chief usually known in the West as Tamerlane: apprehension may have sent the Chinese sniffing for allies and intelligence around the



Official records of Zheng He's voyages to Africa were destroyed, but sailing directions in diagram form survived to be published in 1621. This example shows the Maldives and East Africa

edges of the new menace. Whatever the motives of the expeditions, part of the effect was to consolidate Chinese knowledge of the routes Zheng He took, and to compile practical maps and sailing directions for them.

The admiral was a Muslim eunuch of Mongol ancestry. Every feature of his background marked him as an outsider to the Confucian scholar elite that dominated Chinese political life. When the emperor appointed him to lead the first ocean-going task force in 1403, it was a triumph for four linked factions at court, whose interests clashed with Confucian values. First, there was the commercial lobby, which wanted to mobilize naval support for Chinese traders in the Indian Ocean. Alongside the merchants, an imperialist lobby wanted to renew the program of imperial aggression espoused by the previous dynasty but opposed by Confucians, who theorized that the empire should expand, if at all, by peacefully attracting 'barbarians' into its orbit. Then there was the always powerful Buddhist lobby, which wanted to keep state funds out of skeptical or anticlerical Confucian hands by diverting them to other projects, and which perhaps sensed opportunities for spreading the faith under the official aegis of imperial expansion.

The voyages did display China's potential as the launching bay of a seaborne empire: the capacity and productivity of her shipyards; her ability to mount expeditions of crushing strength and dispatch them over vast distances. Zheng He's encounters with opponents unequivocally demonstrated Chinese superiority. On the first expedition, he encountered a Chinese pirate chief who had set up a bandit state of his own in the sometime capital of Srivijaya in Sumatra. The pirates were slaughtered and their king sent to China for execution. On the third voyage, the Sinhalese king of Ceylon tried to lure Zheng He into a trap and seize the fleet. The Chinese dispersed his forces, captured his capital, deported him to China, and installed a pretender in his place. On the fourth expedition, a Sumatran chief who refused to cooperate in the exchange of gifts for tribute was overwhelmed, abducted, and eventually put to death. Of all Zheng He's acts of political intervention, perhaps the most significant, in terms of long-term consequences, was his attempt to set up a Chinese puppet kingdom to control the trade of the Strait of Melaka, the vital bottleneck in the normal route between China and India. He chose to elevate Paramesvara, a bandit chief who had been driven from his own kingdom and had established a stronghold in the swamps of what is now known as Melaka, on the Malayan coast. In 1409 Zheng He conferred the seal and robes of kingship upon him. Paramesvara traveled to China to pay tribute in person and established a client relationship with the emperor; Chinese patronage turned his modest stronghold into a great and rich emporium.

Zheng He's own perception of his role seems to have combined an imperial impulse with the peaceful inspiration of commerce and scholarship. A stela he erected in 1432 began in a jingoistic vein: 'In the unifying of the seas and continents the Ming Dynasty even goes beyond the Han and the Tang. . . . The countries beyond the horizon and from the ends of the earth have become subjects.' That was an exaggeration, but he added, more plausibly, in deference to traders and geographers, 'However far they may be, their distances and the routes may be calculated.'⁶ An 'overall survey of the ocean's shores' was one of the fruits of the voyages. Copies of the charts survive thanks to the fact that they were reproduced in a printed work of 1621. Like European charts of the same period, they are diagrams of sailing directions rather than attempts at scale mapping. Tracks annotated with compass bearings show the routes between major ports, and represent in visual form the sailing directions Zheng He recorded, all of which have the form 'Follow such-and-such a bearing for such-and-such a number of watches.' Each port is marked with its latitude according to the elevation of the Pole Star above the horizon, which Zheng He verified by means of 'guiding starboards'—ebony strips of various breadths held at a fixed distance from the observer's face to fill the space exactly between the star and the horizon.

Mutual astonishment was the result of contacts on a previously unimagined scale. In the preface to his own book about the voyages, Ma Huan, an interpreter aboard Zheng He's fleet, recalled that as a young man, when he had contemplated the seasons, climates, landscapes, and people of distant lands, he had asked himself in great surprise, 'How can such dissimilarities exist in the world?'⁷

His own travels with the eunuch admiral convinced him that the reality was even stranger. The arrival of Chinese junks at Middle Eastern ports with cargoes of precious exotica caused a sensation. A chronicler at the Egyptian court described the excitement provoked by news of the arrival of the junks off Aden and of the Chinese fleet's intention to reach the nearest permitted anchorage to Mecca.

But the Chinese naval effort could not last. The reasons for its abandonment have been much debated. In many ways, it was to the credit of Chinese decision makers that they pulled back from involvement in costly adventures far from home: most powers that have undertaken such expeditions, and attempted to impose their rule on distant countries, have had cause to regret it. Confucian values, as we have seen, included giving priority to good government at home: 'barbarians' would submit to be ruled by China if and when they saw the benefits: attempting to bludgeon or coax them into submission was a waste of resources. By consolidating their landward empire, and

refraining from seaborne imperialism, China's rulers ensured the longevity of their state: all the maritime empires founded in the world in the last 500 years have crumbled. China is still there.

Part, at least, of the context of the decision to abort Zheng He's missions is clear. The examination system and the gradual discontinuation of other forms of recruitment for public service had serious implications. China became increasingly governed by scholars, with their indifference toward expansion, and gentlemen, with their contempt for trade. In the 1420s and 1430s the balance of power at court shifted in the bureaucrats' favor, away from the Buddhists, eunuchs, Muslims, and merchants who had supported Zheng He. When the Hongxi emperor succeeded the Yongle emperor on the throne in 1424, one of his first acts was to cancel Zheng He's next voyage. He restored Confucian officeholders, whom his predecessor had dismissed, and curtailed the power of other factions. In 1429 the shipbuilding budget was cut almost to extinction. The scholar elite hated overseas adventures, and the factions that favored them, so much that they destroyed all Zheng He's records in an attempt to obliterate his memory. Moreover, China's land frontiers became insecure as Mongol power revived. China needed to turn away from the sea and toward the new threat.⁸

The consequences for the history of the world were profound. Chinese overseas expansion was confined to unofficial migration and, in large part, to clandestine trade, with little or no imperial encouragement or protection. This did not stifle Chinese colonization or commerce. On the contrary, China remained the world's most dynamic trading economy and its most prolific source of overseas settlers. From the fifteenth century onward, Chinese colonists in southeast Asia made vital contributions to the economies of every place they settled; their remittances home played a big part in the enrichment of China. The tonnage of shipping frequenting Chinese ports in the same period probably equaled or exceeded that of the rest of the world put together. But the state's hostility to maritime expansion, which—except in respect of islands close to China—never again abated for as long as the empire lasted, ensured that China never built up the sort of wide-ranging global empire that Atlantic seaboard nations acquired. An observer of the world in the fifteenth century would surely have forecast that the Chinese would precede all other peoples in the discovery of world-girdling, transoceanic routes, and the inauguration of far-flung seaborne imperialism. In fact, nothing of the sort materialized, and the field remained open for the far less promising explorers of Europe to open up the ways around the world.

Of course, the destiny of the world was not determined by a single decision made in China in 1433. China's renunciation of maritime imperialism belongs

in a vast context of influences that help to explain the long-term advantages of Atlantic-side European peoples in the global 'space race.' These influences can be classified as partly environmental, partly economic. The limits of Zheng He's navigations are a clue to the environmental influences. Maritime Asia and coastal East Africa form a remarkably extensive monsoonal region, where long-range navigation relies, as we have seen, on the regular to-ing and fro-ing of the wind. In the fixed-wind environments beyond the region, navigators would find unfamiliar and uncongenial conditions; in the southern Indian Ocean, or, beyond southeast Asia, into the Pacific, they would be compelled to sail against the wind; or, in other directions, they would face the risk of sailing with a following wind and probably never getting home. Moreover, the Indian Ocean is hard to get out of. Below about 10 degrees south a belt of storms deters shipping. The route toward the Atlantic around southern Africa has to round lee shores in the region of what is now KwaZulu-Natal, which, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, became a notorious graveyard for ships that ventured there. This was probably the location of the place called Ha-pu-erh on the maps generated by the Zheng He voyages, beyond which, according to the annotations, the ships did not proceed, owing to the ferocity of the storms. On its eastern flank, maritime Asia is hemmed by the typhoon-racked seas of Japan and the vastness of the Pacific.

To undertake voyages into such hostile seas, Indian Ocean navigators would need a big incentive. That is where economics came in. The Indian Ocean was an arena of such intense commercial activity, and so much wealth, that it would have been pointless for its indigenous peoples to look for markets or suppliers elsewhere. When merchants from northern or central Asia or Europe or the African interior reached the ocean, they came as supplicants, generally despised for their poverty, and found it hard to sell the products of their homelands. Generally, they could prosper only by becoming shippers or pedlars of existing trades.

Chinese disengagement from the wider world was not the result of any deficiency of technology or curiosity. It would have been perfectly possible for Chinese ships to visit Europe or the Americas, had they so wished. Indeed, Chinese explorers probably did get around the Cape of Good Hope, sailing from east to west, at intervals during the Middle Ages. A Chinese map of the thirteenth century depicts Africa in roughly its true shape. A Venetian mapmaker of the mid-fifteenth century reported a sighting of a Chinese or, perhaps, a Javanese junk off the southwest African coast.⁹ But there was no point in pursuing such initiatives: they led to regions that produced nothing the Chinese wanted. Although the evidence that Chinese vessels ever crossed the Pacific to America is, at best, equivocal, it is perfectly possible that they may

have done so. Again, however, it would have been folly to pursue such voyages or attempt systematic contacts across the ocean. No people lived there with whom the Chinese could possibly wish to do business.

To a lesser—but still sufficient—extent the same considerations applied to other maritime peoples of the Indian Ocean and east and southeast Asia. The Arabs, the Swahili merchant communities, Persians, Indians, Javanese and other island peoples of the region, and the Japanese all had plenty of commercial opportunities in their home ocean to keep them fully occupied. Indeed, their problem was, if anything, shortage of shipping in relation to the scale of demand for interregional trade. That was why, in the long run, they generally welcomed interlopers from Europe in the sixteenth century, who were truculent, demanding, barbaric, and often violent, but who added to the shipping stock of the ocean and, therefore, contributed to the general increase of wealth. Paradoxically, therefore, poverty favored Europeans, whom the paucity of economic opportunities at home compelled to explore for them elsewhere. The most spectacular explorations, moreover, departed from the edge of the edge—for Europe was the rim of Eurasia, and the rim of Europe, jutting into the ocean, was Iberia.

Why Iberia'?

Madrid is as far from the sea as you can get in the Iberian peninsula; yet it is full of seafood restaurants and has the biggest fish market in Europe. The Castilian passion for the sea is a curious feature of the history and culture of a people whose heartlands are deep inland and who have been almost cut off from the coasts for formative periods of their pasts. Most of the Atlantic seaboard of the Iberian peninsula, with the mouths of the greatest rivers, the Tagus and the Duero, belongs to the Portuguese, who have maintained an independent state, often hostile to Castile, since the twelfth century. Speakers of Catalan or cognate languages occupy most of the Mediterranean coast: they were not fully incorporated into the Spanish state until long after Castile's worldwide seaborne empire was founded. The northern margins, which, behind their wall of mountains, look out over the Cantabrian Sea, have, for most of the last 1,000 years, belonged to the same political entity as Castile; yet the peoples who occupy most of their shore, along with most of the best harbors, are not Castilians, but Galicians and Basques—communities which contributed a disproportionate share of manpower to Spain's overseas enterprises. In the south, Castile's direct outlets to the Atlantic, via the river Guadalquivir, and to the Mediterranean, across the virtual wastelands of Murcia, were not acquired